

Giving Back — IDRC Photo Contest Winner Shares Prize with Senegalese Colleagues



Brendan Baker

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Brendan Baker can be called many things: an engineer, an international volunteer, an award-winning photographer, and, evidently, a generous man.



The winning photo
Brendan Baker / Engineers Without Borders

The winner of IDRC's "Expose Urban Solutions" photo contest, Baker shared his CA\$2 500 prize with the two people who made his photo possible.

In 2006, IDRC called on amateur and professional photographers around the world to capture the creative ways people living in cities of the South or the developed world are tackling the challenges of urban living.

The winning photos were announced and displayed at IDRC's exhibition booth at WUF3 – the week-long third World Urban Forum held in Vancouver in June 2006 which drew some 10 000 participants to debate the potentials and perils of urban development.

Baker's photo shows Oulymata Coly of Senegal, her hands filled with the colourful recycled-plastic pistons that are vital to accessing clean water and that were the result of a local resident's ingenuity. The photo was judged to embody the spirit of the contest and the Vancouver resident was awarded one of the three top prizes.

Baker snapped the photo in 2004 while working with [Engineers Without Borders](#) (EWB) on a clean-water project in Ziguinchor, a remote town in Senegal. Working with the community, EWB developing a system to draw water from a well using a pump made from a tube, a wheel, rope, and countless pistons. Local resident Abdoulaye Lo

devised a fast and inexpensive way to produce the pistons using plastic recycled from broken buckets.

In late 2006, Baker revisited Senegal. Upon his return to Canada, the 26-year-old wrote to IDRC the following postscript to winning the contest:

“One huge thrill during the trip was being able to reconnect with my friends Oulymata Coly and Abdoulaye Lo, and share news of the photo competition. I brought a copy of the Vancouver Province that featured an article and the photo to show them where their work ended up.

First, I sat with Abdoulaye in his new office – the project has worked out well for him! (Lo’s idea has led to his creating a thriving business that manufactures water pumps) – and explained the situation. I then showed him the article, noticing a glimmer of pride as he saw his pistons.

Following that, I gave him an envelope with a part of the prize money. A reserved and deliberate person, he nonetheless let his surprise slip across his face when he saw the money. He immediately looked up and said “do you wear boubous? [large Senegalese outfits].” I said yes, and wasn’t surprised when later that day he gave me a beautiful yellow one as a gift.

The second stop was with Oulymata, an ex-field staff member from the potable water project. We had worked closely together in 2004, and her involvement had been key in connecting with many local women to understand how the pumps could work in the community.

We were already enjoying a meal when I pulled out the newspaper showing her grinning face splashed across the page. She was entertained, and was trying to read the English as I pulled out another envelope with her share of the prize.

She took it and opened it. Her initial surprise turned to shock as she flipped through the bills, counting about a month’s salary. The timing was good, as Ouly is now unemployed.

Part of fighting this incredible challenge of poverty involves connecting Canadians and, in my case, Senegalese on a meaningful level, so that we can understand the beauty and challenges in other cultures.

The photo competition was a step forward in deepening this understanding and increasing our empathy. It was gratifying to see this connection come full circle, and I’m happy to be able to share it with IDRC.

So from Abdoulaye and Ouly: Thanks.”

Brendan Baker